

Learning toys aimed at preschoolers

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special writer

SHOPPERS WHO have navigated mall toy stores before holiday time always have choice anecdotes to tell of irritable clerks, claustrophobic lines and non-existent parking spaces.

They probably haven't had the pleasure of discovering the many educational-specialty stores that exist in Wayne and Oakland counties.

For those gift-givers who despair of having to settle for the latest action figures and yet another Barbie doll, browsing through the following non-chain stores can be a treat and a blessing.

They are all purveyors of the finely crafted wooden Brio train accessories from Sweden and the imaginative Playmobil sets from Germany.

The latter offers figures and accessories reflecting real-life school, medical, public safety and rodeo scenarios. They evoke fantasy play with its pirate sets and knights in their castle keeps.

The stores also display a sensitivity to the special needs of preschoolers, where safe toys with visual



JIM RIDER/staff photographer

This tea set for small children is available at Peggy's Dolls & Toys, Rochester and Mount Clemens.

stimulation and beginning color, number, shape and constructing skills are the focus.

PEGGY KYLLONEN, owner of Peggy's Dolls & Toys in Rochester and Mt. Clemens, likes to sell her patrons "toys that last."

She sells large volumes of brightly colored bead mazes, which seem to

delight a wide age range and come in three sizes. Her selection of English Gardens preschool-sized trampolines, climbing frame and ropes are consistently popular sellers, too.

In addition to offering popular classic dolls like Madame Alexander and the Rob N Woods dolls, Kyllonen says there's always a big demand for tea sets for small children.

"The porcelain is what we sell so much of," she said. "Often, it's a little girl's grandmother who will come in to purchase a miniature duplicate of a set she owns. Plastic doesn't do nearly so well."

If you're looking for craft items in the \$13-\$16 range, Kyllonen might point you toward the Creativity for Kids line of do-it-yourself "Wild & Woolly Animal Maker," or the "Gross & Yucky Monster Maker," both appropriate for 4 and 5 year olds.

DOLLS ALSO come in every shape, size and hair color at Marmel Toys & Gifts in Farmington Hills, but owners Margie Mellen and Gaye Smith sell dolls with a difference as well. Their personalized sweater dolls, selling at \$22.40, come with the recipient's name hand sewn on a lovely outfit. They must be special ordered a few weeks before needed.

Indeed, personalizing is one of many services Marmel offers its customers. Four in-house artists will decorate and personalize items appropriate for preschoolers and older children.

Favorites are bathtub toy pails, cassette suitcases, art boxes and bulletin boards. Wall sculptures, hats and mirrors are just a few of the other items that can be created with names.

Marmel is also known for its generous selection of puzzles in a wide range of mediums. Its Lauri puzzles are brightly colored, washable crepe rubber pieces appropriate for children 3 years old.

"Any knob puzzle is great for the younger child," said Mellen, a teacher for 20 years who has a master's degree in education.

She sells puzzles in the shapes of balloons, hands and feet, alphabet letters and numbers in bright primary wood.

She demonstrates that "Teddy Bear Bingo" is a great learning tool for 3 year olds because it encourages sharing and cooperation.

FOR FOURS and older, Mellen likes to recommend "Pattern Block Party" because it teaches geometric shapes and spatial relationships and stimulates youngster's sense of design.

If you're planning a car excursion or family vacation sometime soon, Marmel's travel-sized versions of "Pockets of Learning" will make a nice gift. They are suitcase styled, zippered keepsakes that come in four versions: "My Quiet Book," "I Want to Be," "ABC," and "Count and Play." They sell in the \$40 range.

And if you or someone you care about is challenged by a lack of refrigerator space, consider "My Frame." The \$12 gift by My Art is an easily assembled, colored frame for children's artwork.

Whether the child on your list is in nursery school or not, 4 and 5 year olds are starting to develop alphabet and pre-reading skills.

Don Skully, owner of The Creative Learning Center in Walled Lake and Farmington Hills, would encourage you to take advantage of Spear's Games "Spellmaster."

The brightly boxed set comes with 20 colorful cards depicting objects the child is invited to spell. Eighty self-corrective letter tiles have pegs that fit into spaces alongside the picture. It's an activity a child can pursue alone or with a friend. It's priced at \$15.95.

Skully also sells Spear's Games "Fun With Sums," which is priced at \$13.95. It uses the tile principle, too.

IF YOU venture deeper into his store, you're likely to be tempted by character puppets, "Rolling Snakes," a \$7.75 circle of curving snap-on pieces for little ones, and an enchanting space sorter for 2 and 3 year olds modeled after "The Three Little Pigs" (the shape sorter is, of course, the house they hid from the wolf in.)

Skully and staff like Trend Enterprises' series of "See It. Make It." There are sets for 3 and 4 year olds, which include 12 wipe-off boards. The youngster draws what he/she sees. The projects are offered in graduating levels of difficulty.

Whether you plan to buy it or not, it's still a visual pleasure to see the store's "Rainbow Board" by Kidderoo Creative Toys.

The 24-inch by 30-inch flannelboard sports press-on vinyl stickers of an ice cream truck, the alphabet, miniature children, a pet cat, a tree, etc., to help the child create a life-like scene. The board comes with a 15-foot "rainbow rope," hook and tape to attach to a wall and a storage pouch for the characters. It's marked at \$36.95.

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